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MEETING PLACE

Journal of the Royal Ontario Museum

VOL. 1, NO. 9, SPRING 1967

INTRODUCTION

THE ROM IN BRITISH HONDURAS

MEETING PLACE is published by the Royal Ontario Museum, University of Toronto. P. C. Swann, Editor.

This magazine appears as a supplement to VARSITY GRADUATE, and with other ROM activities is supported by the membership. To become a member, write to the Programme Secretary's office, Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Queen's Park, Toronto 5. Annual fee is $15. Life membership, $150. Provincial membership (outside Toronto) $10.

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INTRODUCTION

A few remarks on ROM *field trips and expeditions*

PETER C. SWANN, Director

The Royal Ontario Museum carries out archaeological projects in many parts of the world. In fact, one is tempted to reflect sadly that Canada's greatest Museum is known far better outside Canada than within it.

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We print here an account of our fourth season at Altun Ha in British Honduras. It makes exciting reading.

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THE ROM BRITISH HONDURAS EXPEDITION

Excavation of a Mayan civilization at Altun Ha

David M. Pendergast, Expedition Field Director

January of this year marked the beginning of the fourth season of a five-year project of archaeological excavations carried out by the Royal Ontario Museum at the ancient Maya site of Altun Ha, located on the Caribbean coast some 30 miles north of Belize, the capital of British Honduras. It has had the support of the Harvie Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the University of Utah, and most recently, the Canada Council.

A part of the Maya culture area, which comprises also the Yucatan Peninsula, Guatemala, southern Mexico, and western Spanish Honduras, British Honduras has long been a focus of interest for archaeologists. However, despite more than a half-century of exploration and excavation in the country, much of it remains unknown archaeologically. Prior to the initiation of the Museum's project at Altun Ha, the entire northern coast of the country was an archaeological blank, and selection of this site for excavation was based in part on the hope of providing data to fill in at least some parts of that blank. However, as so often happens in the jungle-clad Maya area, chance discoveries were an important factor in recognizing the potential of Altun Ha, and in the decision to focus the efforts of the Museum expedition on the site.

We set out at Altun Ha with the knowledge that others who had worked in inland sites in British Honduras had long considered that the coastal strip of the country was a sort of cultural hinterland, a backwater area in which little of import had occurred, in which no more than a small part of the richness which characterized Maya civilization elsewhere was to be found. They thought that cultural developments had come far later there than in the heartland of the Maya area. Among the many contributions which the

Museum's excavations have made to our understanding of the Maya, perhaps the major one is an almost complete refocusing of views regarding this periphery of the Maya region. It has resulted in a recognition that the land along the Caribbean was as important in the flow of Maya prehistory as were the inland zones.

The site which we choose to investigate lies on an extensive stretch of limestone platerock, only slightly above sea level, and approximately six miles from a large lagoon of the Caribbean. Most of the intervening area between site and sea consists of lowland and littoral swamp. In a part of the world known for the poor quality of its soil, the area of the site centre at Altun Ha falls near the lower end of the scale of agricultural potential. This is due primarily to the thinness of the layer of soil which caps the limestone. While agricultural potential was a primary consideration for the ancient Maya in selection of a site for habitation, it appears that at Altun Ha the presence of several large ponds, at least one of them spring-fed, was probably the most attractive aspect of the area for the ancient inhabitants. The site grew up around the water sources, with new, artificial catch-basins being added as the population increased, until a maximum area of something in excess of four and one-half square miles was achieved. Like many, but not all, such sites in the Maya area, Altun Ha was, at least in the later centuries of its existence, almost a city, or urban centre, though it differs in some respects from cities encountered elsewhere in prehistory. Though we cannot yet provide any meaningful estimate of maximum population, it is clear that there was a concentration of residential structures near the heart of the site. Small mounds, representing the residences of agriculturists and others in the lower echelons of Maya society, are scattered round the periphery of the settlement. From such a concentration of population we must assume that there exists, or existed in ancient times, a considerable area of good agricultural land not too far distant from the site. However, such an area has not yet been discovered.

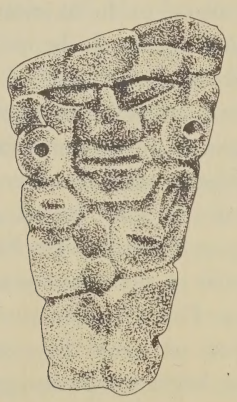
While based primarily on an agricultural economy, the way of life of the people of Altun Ha differed in two major respects from that of the agricultural inland Maya groups. The coastal people augmented the usual range of food resources, including maize, beans, squash, other crops, wild game, and wild plant foods, by the exploitation of maritime resources, which provided an

additional source of protein in the form both of fish and of shellfish, especially conch. Our excavations suggest that the economic base of a coastal community such as Altun Ha was broader, and hence perhaps a little more stable, than that of inland settlements. It is possible also to see the diet of the coastal peoples as more varied, possibly somewhat better balanced nutritionally than that of the inland people, but at present we have not found archaeological evidence of greater fitness or a higher level of activity at Altun Ha than at landlocked sites.

The second difference between the economy of Altun Ha and that of inland settlements was also related to the location of the site near the sea. In addition to collecting shellfish for food, the people of Altun Ha gathered many kinds of shells for use in manufacture of beads, pendants, and other items. Much of the shell thus gathered was traded, probably as raw material rather than as finished artifacts, to inland centres such as Tikal, in Guatemala, where much Caribbean marine material has been recovered. Also, the coastal location of Altun Ha seems to reflect the importance of the site in patterns of trade along the Caribbean coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, extending not only to sites at the southern border of the Maya area, but possibly also to communities in Central America. There is, then, at Altun Ha a far greater richness of material culture than we could have expected from the size and location of the site when we began our investigations. Some of the richness may be due to the possibly more stable economic foundation, but much may be due to the population being involved in both inland and coastal trade.

Though differing from many Maya sites in some economic aspects, Altun Ha is basically similar physically to Maya centres throughout the area. The heart of Altun Ha consists of a group of five major religious structures of the pyramid-temple type. These are large, solid pyramidal substructures with, in most cases, a multi-roomed temple as the superstructure. The temples at Altun Ha are arranged around two plazas, the larger of which (Plaza A) has a north-south length of 238 feet, and a width of 200 feet. The main structures vary in height from 48 to 76 feet, and the largest has a maximum length at the base of just under 200 feet. Another major structure, 70 feet in height, lies some 700 yards south of the central ceremonial precinct, near the largest pond at the site. Between this and the site centre, as well as in all other areas peripheral to the heart of the community, lie large numbers of minor

structures. These include small temples and other structures of ceremonial nature, residences, burial mounds, and buildings of undetermined use. The total number of structures within the confines of the site is not known, and probably can never be fully determined, but we do know that the concentration of structures in some parts of the site approaches 15 to 18 in an area of 750 square yards. Although the size of principal structures and the total extent of the site are impressive, it is clear that Altun Ha was not a major centre. It probably served as the political and religious nucleus of a district of moderate size, encompassing a number of smaller satellite settlements.



Carved figurine, in highly prized translucent jade, found in Mayan tomb. Pierced vertically and horizontally. Height 5 cm., width 2.5 cm.

Since we could never hope to excavate all structures at a site the size of Altun Ha, even if such excavation were desirable, we directed our efforts at sampling as widely as possible. These included the investigation of several of the major ceremonial structures, a number of minor temples and religious edifices, the residences of families of the middle and lower strata of Maya society, a structure designed solely to contain tombs of priests, and a few buildings for which we could ascertain no clear-cut use. To date, more than twenty structures have been tested, partially excavated, or fully investigated. Of these, two will be further cleared in the 1967 season, while we shall examine at least four other buildings for the first time. By the end of the project in 1968, we should have recovered data from something over thirty

structures, including all but one of the major buildings. Though this seems a tiny portion of the whole, it will be sufficient to provide us with a reasonably complete picture of many, though far from all, facets of the life of the ancient Maya at Altun Ha.

Of the major ceremonial structures we now have data from three, plus fairly complete knowledge of the final form of two buildings on very low platforms. These, together with a third, form one border of the second plaza in the main ceremonial precinct. Each structure excavated shows a different type, both in the form of the temple or superstructure and in methods of construction, as well as in elements of architectural decoration. As is typical of most Maya sites, all the buildings are actually a series of structures, superimposed on one another. Thus one of our tasks consists of cutting through later phases of construction in order to learn something of earlier structures.

Rebuilding of temples and other structures was a basic part of Maya life, and in the case of religious construction the custom appears to spring from the Maya concept of a life span for buildings, as perhaps also for other objects. Maya religion seems to have embodied the idea that a temple or other religious edifice could be utilized for a specific period of time, after which it could no longer serve as a locale for ceremonies or sacrifices. When the life of a structure had ended, they abandoned the building, though not in favour of a new location. Instead, the now useless structure was often partly razed, and a new building erected atop the old. Occasionally the structure was modified by the addition of wings, by blocking up old doorways and cutting of new ones, perhaps by redecorating interior and exterior wall surfaces, and in other ways, so that in effect the old building no longer existed. By cutting into or removing the later phases of construction and reversing the construction process, so to speak, we are able to learn something of the changes which took place in temples and other buildings, and we often encounter in the process the tombs of the priest-rulers of Maya society cut into structures about to be capped by new construction.

One of the great problems facing the Mayanist is that of dating the phases of construction occurring in any given edifice. Since much of the material encountered in a phase consists of fill, usually at Altun Ha a mass of limestone boulders mixed with soil, it is inevitable that artifacts, primarily fragments of pottery, will be recovered from the structure. The builders could

hardly collect soil for construction without including bits of pottery and other discarded objects which had accumulated around the settlement. Obviously, though, such material is not a good clue to the age of the construction, since the pottery gathered with fill soil might be centuries earlier than the building in which it ultimately comes to lie. At most, the fragments recovered from structural fill provide a rough maximum age for the phase, since the building obviously cannot be older than the pottery it contains. We cannot, therefore, date each phase of a building with full certainty, but we have been fortunate in recovering from several of the structures samples of carbonized material, often resinous incense, from which we should ultimately be able to obtain absolute dates through application of the radiocarbon dating method.

At present, we can say with fair certainty that the final phases of all the major structures date from some time not long before the collapse of civilization at Altun Ha and the abandonment of the site centre, which appears to have occurred near the middle of the 10th Century A.D. Moving back in time from this point, we have recovered data on three phases of one of the temples excavated (Structure A-1), on the last two phases of a second (Structure A-5), and on a total of eight phases of the third (Structure B-4).

Structure A-1 is the only one of the three major ceremonial buildings investigated which is characterized by the generally typical form of such structures, having a temple of four rooms atop a stepped substructure. One unusual aspect of the superstructure is the presence of a doorway at the south side of the temple which leads out onto a narrow moulding no more than 10 inches wide. At the front of the temple the main doorway opens onto a simple frieze panel, with no steps leading down from the floor level of the temple to the platform some twenty inches below. There are indications that a wooden stairway may have existed below the main doorway, but like the tremendous range of other perishables used by the Maya, including objects of wood, cloth, and feathers, this has succumbed to the ravages of tropical humidity. Destruction of roof beams and lintels in the A-1 temple has resulted in the total collapse of the roof. Like those elsewhere in the Maya area, this was in the form of a corbelled vault, so it is not now possible to reconstruct the appearance of the upper portions of the structure.

A-1 is of interest also because it contains indications of the decadence which characterized the final activity at Altun Ha. Not only is the latest addition

to one of the access stairways a miserable attempt, utilizing blocks robbed from some other structure and set in loose black earth, but there is also evidence that the main substructure itself had begun to come to pieces, probably as a result of the pressure and stresses exerted by the temple mass. It is clear that the Maya attempted to prevent collapse of the building not with the sort of well-constructed buttressing which might have been produced in earlier times, but with masses of boulders and cobbles set in lime mortar, and left in rough, unfaced condition. Together with data from other major structures, the information from A-1 indicates strongly the decline of control exerted by the priestly caste at Altun Ha, and brings rather sharply into focus the picture of the seeds of collapse which had been planted perhaps a century or more prior to the fall of Maya civilization at this coastal community.

Cutting into earlier phases of A-1 produced data on major changes which had taken place in the form and pattern of use of the building in preceding centuries. It also revealed a tomb, typical of those encountered at Altun Ha in form and construction, with boulder walls and large, heavy slabs of flint as the ceiling, but somewhat richer in contents than some of the other tombs excavated. We came to call this the Green Tomb, due to the presence of almost 300 jade objects among the raiment of the priest interred in the crypt. Among the jades were pendants with carved representations of human figures, mythical animals, and forms combining human and animal characteristics, plus representations of actual animals, such as turtles and birds, as well as large numbers of carved and plain beads. The tomb also yielded a magnificent pair of ear ornaments, looking rather like elaborate napkin rings, made from obsidian, with glyphs, elements of the Maya hieroglyphic system of writing, carved on them. In addition, we found masses of shell objects, and 65 pearls, ranging from 2 millimetres to 2.7 centimetres in diameter. However, of greatest importance were the badly fragmented remains of a codex, or book, of which only the thin stucco wash which had coated the fig-bark paper was preserved. Such codices are extremely rare in the Maya area, and the discovery at Altun Ha, paralleled by similar finds in another tomb, is among the first from Maya archaeological sites, certainly the first published report of incontrovertible evidence of the interment of such books with priests during the Classic period, the time of the florescence of Maya civilization.

Across Plaza A from A-1 lies Structure A-5, highly interesting because of the unusual form of the superstructure, which consists of a single room running the length of the structure, having a total length of approximately 92 feet, and an interior width of only 33 inches. Excavations are continuing

Carved jade head, pierced as pendant or bead.
Height 3.5 cm., width 2.5 cm.

in this building, the major part of which is a single phase. We hope in the remaining seasons to clear more of the second phase back in time, and perhaps also to be able to investigate earlier structural phases as well. The most important discoveries made in A-5 thus far consist of two groups of large, so-called "eccentric" flints, chipped in naturalistic and partly geometric shapes, and produced for use in offerings and as burial accompaniments. The flints occur quite frequently at Altun Ha, both in caches and in tombs, but their importance in A-5 lies in the fact that they were deposited long after the structure had been abandoned, and, in fact, after the roof of the superstructure had collapsed. This indicates the presence of individuals or groups who continued to view the centre with reverence at a time when the complex ceremonial and social aspects of life at Altun Ha were no more than a memory. The data from A-5 fit into a pattern emerging from excavations elsewhere at the site, showing that, as elsewhere in the Maya area, the abandoned ceremonial centre continued to be a site for pilgrimage and worship for many centuries, perhaps up to or even after the Spanish Conquest.

Of the three smaller structures which form the southern limit of the second major plaza, we have partly investigated two. The final phase in each has been fully cleared and one of the two excavations has also yielded data on three earlier phases of construction. The more fully excavated structure

illuminates an aspect of Maya construction which had long gone unrecognized, but which is now being revealed at many sites, namely the frequently poor quality of Maya construction. It has been generally accepted that the Maya were precise craftsmen, laying out buildings with square corners and plumb walls, then finishing the walls with beautifully smoothed plaster. While it must be granted that such was sometimes the case, buildings thus constructed appear to be the exception rather than the rule. It would seem that the ancient Maya engineers and architects (for we can assume that such specialists, like specialists in many crafts, were a part of Maya society) faced the same problems which arise in the construction industry today. It suggests that religious control is no more effective than secular control in ensuring the highest possible quality in such undertakings.

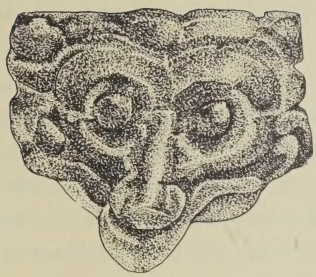
At the east side of this same plaza stands Structure B-4, the tallest of the major buildings. Here we began in 1965 a program of excavation which has yielded data on eight phases of construction and six priestly tombs. This structure, too, deviates from the general pattern, since it never included a superstructure in the form of a temple. It featured small quadrangular platform-like elements at the top in later phases, and by unusual altars in earlier times. We have now cut away entirely the last five phases of construction, which included a series of elements constructed solely for the purpose of housing tombs (Phases I through IV) and a structure topped by a round altar 9 feet in diameter at the base and 52 inches high (Phase V). The removal of this altar revealed an earlier, similar structure, and made clear the use of such altars in sacrifical rites involving burning of resin and jade objects. We recovered from around the base of the earlier altar masses of carbonized resin, plus hundreds of fragments of elaborately carved jade pendants and beads, all of them badly burned and shattered. We can only guess at the reason for sacrifices of such great import to the Maya. Jade was a material of the greatest value, but the relationship of jade to fertility and to water may indicate that the sacrifices were part of the cycle of agricultural ceremonies.

Structure B-4 has yielded more tombs than any other investigated, and has also provided the almost unique opportunity of dating the six tombs relative to one another, since each of the interments is clearly associated with a phase of construction. We are now able to recognize that each of the last six phases

of construction except Phase V contained a tomb, so that we have a sequence of tomb construction extending from perhaps the middle of the 7th Century A.D. to approximately A.D. 900 or 925. In this period the general pattern of tombs changed not at all, though the last three tombs in the sequence reflect the same sort of decline in quality of construction as in parts of Structure A-1. The orientation of the body, the placement of accompanying offerings, and the range of objects present remained essentially the same for the last few centuries of the life of Altun Ha, and in fact we can trace them in other tombs back to the mid-4th Century A.D. This indicates a high degree of conservatism, or a desire to maintain the existing pattern rather than introduce innovations in this aspect of Maya life.

Despite the general uniformity in tomb construction, each tomb has yielded objects different in specific ways from those found in other tombs, and each has also produced one or more special objects unlike anything else recovered at the site. The special objects in the B-4 tombs range from a group of large jade pendants to matched pairs of pyriform pearls nearly three-fourths of an inch in length. In the most recently discovered tomb, we found a huge jade plaque or pendant, nearly rectangular in outline, weighing one pound five ounces and eight inches long by two and three-fourths inches wide by almost an inch thick. The obverse is carved with the figure of a priest in costume, seated atop a sort of throne which embodies a semi-human face. Below this hangs a fringe which rests atop a large face with half-closed eyes, forming the bottom of the plaque. However, the reverse is the more important surface, for it contains a hieroglyphic text, a great rarity in the Maya area on jade objects. The twenty glyphs which make up the text include two dates, which appear to fall in the last half of the 6th Century A.D. Assuming the tomb to have been constructed between A.D. 675 and 725, and assuming the later of the two dates on the plaque to be close to the date of manufacture, it appears that the plaque, like other elaborate jade objects in the Maya area, remained in use for a century or more, and was interred with the remains of a priest only when it had achieved heirloom status.

As is true of most of the other elaborately carved jades from Altun Ha, full analysis of the plaque must await completion of the excavation program. However, we can now recognize a wide range of carving styles, as well as a great deal of variation in colour and texture of jade. The latter suggests that



Carved jade animal head. Pierced horizontally.
Height 3.5 cm., width 4 cm.

the jade occurring at Altun Ha may well have come from a number of sources, including not only those known to occur in the Maya area, but possibly also Central American sources. We should ultimately be able not only to link the jade with specific sources, but also to relate the stylistic variations present at Altun Ha to patterns encountered elsewhere in the Maya area. This would provide important evidence regarding the sequence of styles in jade carving.

Curiously, the most important fund of information produced by excavations in B-4 has come not from the richly furnished tombs mentioned above, but rather from a group of three tombs which were almost devoid of contents. It is precisely the lack of objects which makes the tombs of special significance, for it is clear that the absence of jades, shell objects, and the other usual burial accompaniments is due not to a change in burial pattern, but to wilfully destructive acts on the part of some group. Each of the three tombs contained, in addition to masses of soil which had obviously been dumped into the crypts, fragments of human bone, bits of shell objects, an occasional piece of jade, and sherds of pottery. In one tomb in particular, there was evidence of the burning of shell objects and jades. Virtually the only items which escaped damage or destruction were groups of large flints which had been encased in the tomb walls. Clearly, the destruction seen in the tombs could not have been the result of looting. No looter, ancient or modern, would have destroyed elaborately carved jade objects. Nor presumably would he have expended such effort in destroying all tomb contents, filling the crypt with soil, and, finally, heaving onto the soil the flint roof

slabs which had been removed to permit entry. Evidence of tomb looting in ancient times from other sites in the Maya area includes none of the sort of destruction found in Altun Ha, though there are suggestions that scattering of the skeleton might have been practised. This was done perhaps in order to prevent vengeance by the spirit of the tomb's occupant.

The logical conclusion to be drawn from the data derived from the three tombs is that the destruction was an act of intentional desecration almost certainly performed by inhabitants of Altun Ha at about the time Structure B-4, like others in the site centre, ceased to be used. In this respect, the location of the three tombs near the surface of the structure, where they could have been reached easily by the desecrators, may be significant, in that it may have determined which tombs were attacked. The act itself may be of broader significance, for if we have read the evidence correctly there is a strong suggestion that the collapse of civilization at Altun Ha was accompanied by violence. It may have resulted from a type of peasant revolt against the theocratic rulers, and possibly involved acts of violence against the living priests as well as their dead predecessors. It seems likely that a violent end did not come to Maya civilization at all centres, so that we cannot, at least at present, extrapolate from the Altun Ha evidence to produce a general statement for the entire Maya area. However, the data from B-4 do appear to shed significant light on the demise of Maya civilization in one peripheral area, and they may suggest the need for re-examination of data from other sites.

In addition to excavations in the central ceremonial precinct of the site, we have carried out investigations in outlying groups, particularly those lying south and east of the centre. Here, results have ranged from a series of three tombs, generally similar to, though somewhat less rich than, those in the major structures, and dating by radiocarbon determination from the 4th and 5th centuries A.D., to a large body of material, including pottery, burials, and miscellaneous artifacts from house mounds. They include nearly complete information on the evolution of a minor temple, now completely excavated.

The data from residential mounds include a wide range of offerings which like the tombs conform generally to a single pattern, but in each case have provided some new material. In addition to this we have collected a very large amount of ceramic material covering the period from the 10th Cen-

tury A.D. back to some time prior to the beginning of the Christian era. The earlier pieces relate to the apparent beginnings of occupation at Altun Ha, in what is usually termed the Pre-Classic. Unfortunately, the very early materials lie encased in sticky black clay, too difficult to excavate when wet, and impossible to penetrate when dry and hard. Thus we have been forced to restrict our investigation of this time level to a short period after the beginning of the dry season, when the clay layer is damp but workable. We hope in coming seasons to extend our efforts in this part of the occupation span at the site, but it appears that the body of Pre-Classic data will remain regrettably small even by the end of the final season of excavation.

From the minor temple which has been completely excavated we have recovered an invaluable range of information bearing on evolution of architectural forms. However, the major result of this work was unexpected for the temple proved to have served also as a sort of mortuary structure, housing the remains of fifty-three individuals, many of them accompanied by one or more pottery vessels. Since the burials were made in each phase of the building prior to its abandonment and the subsequent construction of a new edifice atop it, it is possible to place all of the burials relatively in time, and also to recognize contemporaneity of the wide range of pottery vessels accompanying the many burials in any given phase. Complete excavation of the sort carried out in this structure is not a usual course of action, since the amount of material to be removed in a large structure would be staggering. However, this one small structure serves as a sort of microcosm of events during the last few centuries of the existence of Altun Ha as a major centre. Our struggles with a beehive-like mass of burials have here proved eminently worth while.

Farther from the central precinct, near the one major structure lying at the border of one of the principal ponds, our excavations have produced a totally unexpected sort of information, yielded by the least imposing sort of structure. Our intention was initially attracted to a small mound lacking any indications of stone architecture by the presence near its border of a group of large stone slabs. On one of these was pecked a series of concentric circles with radiating lines, a design possibly of calendric significance. Excavation within the fill of the mound showed no link between the stones and the structure, but revealed an offering cache like those encountered elsewhere. This suggested that the

mound had been a low, stone-faced platform atop which a thatched house had once stood. Excavations outside of the facing of the platform revealed the real significance of the structure. Here, in a mass of garbage deposited by the users, we recovered a range of ceramic and other evidence which indicated that people had been at Altun Ha far later than suspected, and that they had been linked, probably by trade, with Maya settlements which were still flourishing as centres farther north in the the Mexican state of Quintana Roo.

Completion of the excavation of the garbage dump in the season just past has shown that the Maya, presumably remnants of the population concentrated around the site up to the 10th Century A.D., were still present in the 14th and 15th centuries A.D. This, together with the earliest available Spanish documentation for northern British Honduras, makes it reasonably certain that, contrary to the usual belief, there was never a total depopulation of this part of the Maya area following the fall of Classic Maya civilization. Unfortunately, our data thus far come entirely from a residential context. Therefore we cannot answer questions regarding the level of late occupation, or whether there might have been a partial renaissance in the social, political, and technological spheres of Maya life at Altun Ha in the last few centuries prior to Spanish Conquest, with the main focus perhaps in the area of the pond, rather than in the old central precinct. We hope to be able to answer such questions through excavation of the major structure in the pond area during the two seasons remaining to us. However, this will be a formidable task with the relatively small amount of time available.

In a brief summary report such as this, which compresses the results of three seasons of excavation into a few pages, hundreds of significant aspects of the Museum's work at Altun Ha must be omitted, or touched on only briefly. We must also unwillingly omit full mention of the cooperation of the Government of British Honduras and the assistance of the many who have lent their talents to the project. However, I hope that the resumé of the fieldwork presented here will serve to give those acquainted with the Royal Ontario Museum's efforts in other parts of the world at least a glimpse of the contributions to our understanding of Maya prehistory and to the broad stream of human knowledge made and yet to be made by the British Honduras Expedition.